Causes sought behind Coteau leukemia cases

By Dan McCaleb
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COTEAU — Residents concerned about a leukemia cluster that has been identified here are forming a core group of volunteers to collect information about possible sources of environmentally-hazardous contamination.

Group members then hope that the contamination sources will be investigated by health officials to determine if they have contributed in any way to the cluster, group leader Joan Smith said.

"About 30 people have signed up to help gather this information," said Smith, whose 8-year-old niece was diagnosed with leukemia last month. "If I'm going to continue to live here, I want to know what's going on. I just hope that after a while, the interest doesn't die down."

Smith's niece was the fourth child diagnosed with leukemia in Coteau since 1986. All four children lived within a one-mile radius of each other, near the Captain Cade Road, Freetown Road and La. 88 area in this rural Iberia Parish community. Four other cases of leukemia also have been identified in nearby Youngsville.

According to statistics provided by the state Health Department, roughly 10 out of every 100,000 people in south Louisiana were diagnosed with leukemia between 1983 and 1986, the last years for which such statistics are available. The 10 per 100,000 figure is comparable to national rates.

An estimated 6,000 people reside in Coteau and surrounding areas, making its incidence rate at least 66.6 persons per 100,000. But because the four confirmed leukemia cases in Coteau were all within a one-mile radius, the incidence rate there actually is much higher.

"There is no doubt that this is a cluster," said New Iberia chemist Wilma Subra, who is helping the Coteau group gather contamination source information.

Leukemia is a type of cancer in which bone marrow and other blood forming organs produce increased numbers of certain types of white blood cells. It causes an increased susceptibility to infection, anemia and bleeding and can be fatal.

Two of the four Coteau children diagnosed with the disease, both of them boys, have died. The other two, both girls, are treating the cancer with chemotherapy.

State health officials are in the process of verifying the diagnoses of the four Coteau cases and have said they would call for a federal investigation if the cluster is confirmed.

The next step, they said, would be to determine if any environmental factors triggered the leukemia cases in the children. Such an investigation could take years and is not guaranteed to be successful, they said.

The investigation will include landfills, pesticides, water supplies, abandoned oil wells, and other potentially hazardous sites.